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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

TRANSMUTE

by

Joseph W. Montroy

11/15/08

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Abstract

Man has an enduring subconscious connection with anthropological imagery and narrative. This association extends to the methods and practices that place importance on certain objects over others. In every culture throughout history the shared understanding of existence has been determined by images, symbols and archetypes. Intuitive logic and shared unconscious knowledge pervaded the daily lives of pre-modern man. Early people maintained a stronger connection with nature, spirituality and the subconscious. Archaic man acknowledged one stone among many as possessing spiritual properties. That stone could become a sacred receptacle that differentiated it from all others and saturated it with meaning and value. I believe any object can acquire an allegorical content. The similarities between cultures with no apparent contact are striking, the same artifacts, stories and explanations of existence originated in different cultures separated by thousands of miles. My interests lie in the narrative power of the objects themselves. These mythic objects were used as symbols of the stories of creation.

Thesis Approval

Chief Advisor Elizabeth Kronfield

Date:

Associate Advisor Tom Lightfoot

Date:

Associate Advisor Eileen Bushnell

Date:

Department Chairperson Don Arday

Date:

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INTRODUCTION

Original thesis statement:

In every culture throughout history the shared understanding of existence has been determined by images, symbols and archetypes.¹ Intuitive logic and shared unconscious knowledge pervaded the daily lives of pre-modern man. Early people maintained a stronger connection with nature, spirituality and the subconscious. I will be focusing the majority of my thesis on this concept and the pre-modern objects, imagery, and beliefs. The similarities between cultures with no apparent contact are striking, the same artifacts, stories and explanations of existence originated in different cultures separated by thousands of miles. My interests lie in the narrative power of the objects themselves. These mythic objects were used as symbols of the stories of creation. It will be the objects of the myths that are the locus of my work.

Man has an enduring subconscious connection with anthropological imagery and narrative. This association extends to the methods and practices that place importance on certain objects over others. The artist Yves Klein felt that he could project invisible spiritual entities into his work through meditation.² Walter Benjamin, an early twentieth century philosopher, spoke about the aura of a work of art as something consisting of symbolic properties that constitute its autonomy.³ Archaic man acknowledged one stone among many as possessing spiritual properties. That stone could become a sacred receptacle that differentiated it from all others and saturated it with meaning and value.⁴ I believe any object can acquire an allegorical content.

¹ Eliade, Mircea. Myth and Reality. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper and Row. 1963.

² McEvelley, Thomas. Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

³ Zipes, Jack. Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales. New York: Routledge. 1979.

⁴ Eliade, Mircea. The Myth Of The Eternal Return. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Pantheon Books. 1954.

Additional Statements:

The intent of my thesis work is to promote questions, encourage speculation and ultimately allow the subconscious, of the viewer, to make connections incorporating conscious knowledge, experiences, new forms and stories. In my thesis I am not attempting to define the myths/stories I choose, perpetuate any myth/story for posterity, or illustrate any myth /story with particular emphasis. I will attempt to imbue physical objects with meaning and a narrative.

Additionally, there are certain forms that possess intangible qualities allegorically connecting the present with the past. Anish Kapoor calls them “Primal Forms” My interests lay in the narrative power of the objects and the connection we have and can make as individuals to this shared information.

I have chosen the content that I am attracted to both visually and conceptually that will facilitate what I believe to be relevant and exploitable. In some instances the sculpture will function to perpetuate a direct connection with an actual object or story, in other cases, I will extort this implied connection despite the superficial nature of the material and context.

As I continued to research ideas surrounding the core idea of my work I stumbled upon more and more information and references to the idea. Many words began to mean the same thing for me: transcendence, transmutation, letting go, transition, cosmogonic, suspension of disbelief, and non-attachment.

The objects became everything and nothing. I struggled with this more than any other aspect of the work. At times I became a part of ‘real’ history, at other times I was merely fabricating history. The objects I made were a false relic of an idea I made up and connected to something ‘real’. I could not decide if I myself believed in the objects or not.

CONTENT

Personal Background:

I grew up in the woods around my rural New York home, an area that was all but abandoned with a population numbering in the low hundreds. It was home to a number of waterways including the most prominent, the West Canada River, which cut its way through the Adirondack Mountains and down to the Mohawk River in Herkimer N.Y. One of the most exceptional parts of this river is the series of waterfalls in the Trenton area of the river. The water drops a significant height and creates an impressive gorge along roughly five miles of the river. During the last century a number of power companies have capitalized on the river and gorge by creating a series of dams and power plants. As a child these architectural elements of the gorge were as impressive to me as the oppressive sound and scale of the gorge walls and rushing water. Wandering around the forest I would stumble upon remnants of life and industry scattered throughout. Much of this was abandoned and allowed to deteriorate to a state where the original use and intention was undistinguishable. Such were the gigantic hollow mounds of earth littered with a dark glass like substance near abandoned railroad beds. Much later I would discover that this glass was slag and the mounds furnaces for melting iron. There were also huge boulders with giant steel bolts and rings inserted into them that left dripping rust stains. Tubing seven feet tall traveling along cliff walls and descending into cement buildings integrated seamlessly into the sides of 200-foot cliffs. Cement cradles, that held steel tubing, were now left empty and skeletal, silhouetted against the sky.

The scale of the gorge was oppressive. The cliffs surrounding the gorge would all but block the sun for most of the day. The sound of the water echoing through the gorge was intense and left clear and physical proof of its force in the sedimentary rock. Stone basins carved by small pebbles swirling around over time had an organic quality, which contrasted with the industrial constructions. Looking back I did not interpret it as man

versus nature, but rather a seamless integration and mutual development. I interpreted the manmade elements as part of the history of the location. The span of time they inhabited was simultaneously now and then. I made no distinction between rocks and gorges whose history is unfathomably distant and the iron and steel, a century old, incorporated into the stone. My reaction was not about mans interference with nature but the story about the two elements themselves.

I find myself very attracted to these elements in my surroundings: forms with an implied function, with hints of use and history. In the woods, the man made objects and structures were integrated so seamlessly into the natural surroundings they lost their individual identities. I like this because it allowed a new identity to be projected on them and a new history to be written about them. This also allowed for a sense of self-examination to take place, where the subconscious begins to take charge and make connections that otherwise may not have surfaced.

The sculpture I have been making up to this point has always reflected my upbringing in a very natural setting. Much of the work was organic in nature. Eventually I also became interested in examining communication between individuals. This led me to creating spaces for people to occupy, transitional spaces for communication. I think I started to connect these spaces with the metaphysical spaces created with architecture such as Neolithic stone monuments and stone burial sites. Once I started looking at this information I was instantly drawn towards it. The idea was much larger than most of the ideas I had been working with, it turned into a universal search for transcendence instead of an individuals search for connection to another. I view these as the same however, in that I believe the story of one person is the story of all people.

Discussion of ideas: Pre-modern

My attraction to history also led me to research another interest, remnants of pre-modern civilization including myths, stories, monoliths and stone circles. These objects have no real function in our time other than to incite curiosity and provoke scientific examination. These primitive constructions or constellations mark the land they sit on defining a space different from all other spaces.

The word primitive is sometimes used to describe materials or tools. It can also refer to what anthropologists call “Sacred Space” or “Sacred Place”. Used interchangeably, these terms refer to an area ritually demarcated, a site made holy because the gods were there or may be persuaded to appear. These sites pulse with power.⁵



In many ways pre-modernism connects itself to a branch of postmodernism. The idea that nothing is new or can be new is how most ancient peoples saw their world. Everything had been done before and their lives were just repeating the cosmogony. In a very important way artists are now just continuing the work of their ancestors. Throughout the world there have been places where, even today, humans go to

become receptive to something out side themselves.

-Titus Burckhardt. “A sacred art is not necessarily made up of images, even in the broadest sense of the term; it may be no more than the quiet, silent exteriorization, as it were, of a contemplative state, and in this case- or in this respect- it reflects no ideas, but transforms the surroundings qualitatively, by having them share in an equilibrium whose center of gravity is unseen.”⁶Pi.

Pre-modern, or ‘traditional’ societies formulated their metaphysical concepts using symbols, myths, and rites. These expressed a complex system of coherent affirmations about the ultimate reality of things and this system could be compared to

⁵ Korp, Maureen. Sacred art of the earth. New York: The Contium Publishing Company, 1987

⁶ Korp, Maureen. Sacred art of the earth. New York: The Contium Publishing Company, 1987.

metaphysics. One of the most important aspects of pre-modern societies was this ability to explain the world around them by establishing analogies between nature and human life. “Intuitive ‘mythic’ logic and observation of nature made the world comprehensible in a different way from the rational abstract modes of thinking we now use.”⁷ This ability was lost when the art of writing replaced these basic means of explaining the world.

When we examine archaic, pre-modern man we notice that the objects of the external world and human acts have no intrinsic value. Objects and acts acquire a value and become real, by participating in a reality that transcends them. “Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred – and hence instantly becomes saturated with being- because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act, and so on. The object appears as a receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value. This force may reside in the substance of the object or in its form.”⁸ I believe the intention has a large part to do with the work of art and the intent is inside the work and then made clear through the viewer. For example Janine Antonie was raised a catholic and examined Christian monasticism themes as transubstantiation, as well as Asian meditative disciplines. She talks about the transubstantiation and turning bread into the body of Christ and the power it has on the faithful. She said, “one of my biggest questions is, how does an object accrue power?”⁹

-Mircea Eliade, “The most elementary hierophanies are nothing but a radical ontological separation of some object from the surrounding cosmic zone; some tree, some stone, some place, by the mere fact that it reveals that it is sacred, that it has been, as it were, “chosen” as a receptacle for a manifestation of the sacred,

⁷ McMann, Jean. Riddles of the stone age: rock carvings of ancient Europe. New York: Thames and Hudson. 1980.

⁸ Eliade, Mircea. The Myth of the Eternal Return. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Pantheon Books. 1954.

⁹ Larson, Kay. “Keeping the Faith.” Art News. February. 98+.

is thereby ontologically separated from all other stones, trees, places, and occupies a different, a supernatural plane. “¹⁰p5

The ultimate physical and spiritual value or power of an object is derived from the connection it has to the primordial acts it represents. For us to understand this archetype thoroughly we must approach the problem of human existence and archaic spirituality. We can take into consideration the statements by Mircea Eliade in Myth of the eternal return.

- “1) Facts show us that, for archaic man, reality is a function of the imitation of a celestial archetype. “
- “2. Facts show us how reality is conferred through participation in the ‘symbolism of the center’: cities, temples, houses become real by the fact of being assimilated to the ‘center of the world.’ “
- “3. Rituals and significant profane gestures which acquire the meaning attributed to them and materialize that meaning, only because they deliberately repeat such and such acts posited ab origine by gods, hero’s, or ancestors.”¹¹ P5.

There are objects that seem to embody power and authority. Some objects found inside tombs seemed to legitimize the owner’s position of power by allowing the owner to be a mediator with the gods. These objects were shaped like axe heads but were unusable because of blunt edges. Essentially the owner of the objects was in communication with the gods, connection to the spiritual, because of the object. The power of many of the symbols, however, depends upon the context of their presentation. The use of spiral designs and geometric patterns can be found throughout Europe but the apparent meaning is always in connection with a burial. The two elements of objects and design link the world of the living with the world of the dead. The spiral motif is found

¹⁰ Eliade, Mircea. Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 1970.

¹¹ Eliade, Mircea. The Myth Of The Eternal Return. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Pantheon Books. 1954.

predominantly on curb stones, stones that flank the entrances to tombs in Ireland and Brenton. These stones seem to delineate and emphasize the sacred area.¹²

Essentially all of pre-modern life was governed by the repetition of the cosmogony through myths, and mythic acts. Revealed by divine beings in *illo tempore*, at the beginning of time, during mythic time.¹³ Everything the myths related concerned the pre-modern society directly. The knowledge of these myths was important, “the myths taught people how to repeat the creative acts of the supernatural beings and thus how to ensure the continuation of life as they know it.”¹⁴ The story or myth was also important to the individual who knew it. It constitutes a secret and a power over the object, animal or plant attained by knowing its origin. Knowing the story is equivalent to acquiring a magical power over them. This control allows the individual to reproduce or control the object, or plant etc. at will. “The Cuna Indians believe that if an animal can be tamed it is because the magicians know the secret of their creation. Similarly you can hold a red-hot iron, or grasp a poisonous snake if you know the origin of fire and snakes.”¹⁵ In Sir James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* he uses a term called sympathetic magic, which essentially suggests that if one is to symbolically recreate a heavenly event with the hopes of inducing that event, such as pouring water to bring rain, it can be brought into reality. This idea is also seen throughout prehistory and across cultures. This concept is especially prevalent in the recreation of the world through the circle, ladders, and trees.¹⁶ This idea, although abstract in today’s word, is very important to the work I have made. I have attempted to examine how objects tell their story and the receptiveness of the individual to that story. My message is subversive and never blatant. I have been greatly influenced by the following passage by Mircea Elaide.

¹² Clarke, D.V., T.G. Cowie, and Andrew Foxon; with contributions by John C. Barrett, Ian Shepherd, Joan Taylor, and Caroline Wickham Jones. Symbols of Power at the Time of Stonehenge. Edinburgh: National Museum of Scotland: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office. 1985.

¹³ Eliade, Mircea. Myth and Reality. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper and Row. 1963.

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ Frazer, Sir James. The Golden Bough; a Study in Magic and Religion. New York: Macmillan. 1963.

-Mircea Eliade *“Real authentic existence begins at the moment when the primordial history is communicated to the individual and he accepts the consequences. It is always sacred history. These myths represent values that are transcendent, in the sense that they are held to be revealed by Divine beings’ or mythical Ancestors. These models are conveyed by myths. Myths are the most general and effective means of awakening and maintaining consciousness of another world, a beyond, this other world represents a superhuman, “transcendent” plane. One has to merely repeat the cosmogonic ritual, whereupon the unknown territory—“chaos” is transformed into “cosmos”. ”*¹⁷p92.

The history and remnants of pre-modern man have greatly influenced my making of this work. I believe there are connections that can be drawn between the subconscious and primal forms. The idea that an archetype exists and still functions today is fascinating to me. I believe it is valid because our interest in pre-modern stories and objects persists. Our need to explain the unknown is as strong now as ever before. The religious convictions of the masses alone can attest to these mystical connections we as a people cling to even today.

Religion:

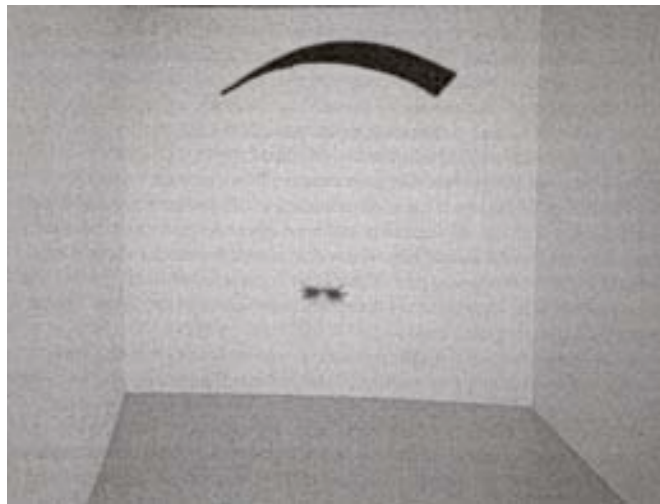
Lama ANagarika Govinda writes that if “we look at a landscape and imagine that what we see exists as an independent reality outside of ourselves, we are victims of illusion. If however we see the same landscape painted by a great artist, then in spite of the fact that the painting creates the visual illusion of a landscape- we experience an aspect of reality, because we are conscious of the illusion and accept it as an expression

¹⁷ Eliade, Mircea. Myth and Reality. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper and Row. 1963.

of a real experience. The moment we recognize an illusion as an illusion, it ceases to be illusion and becomes an expression or aspect of reality and experience.”¹⁸

She goes on to talk about some people describing the decision to enter a work of art fully as the “will full suspension of disbelief”. She interpreted this as referring to a conscious effort to ‘let go’ of the way we experience the world. She relates that Buddhism teaches us to relate to the world with openness, and acceptance. I have found ‘the letting go’ to be a very relevant expression of the idea and goal I have sought after. This idea is key to how I have approached my thesis in general. In one way I am aware that I made the work with the intention of fabricating a narrative for the viewer to decode, or perceive. In another way I myself could suspend my disbelief and as a maker of objects, accept that I have created something more than the sum of its parts. The object could indeed transcend its physicality and become what I have intended it to be. The question that is raised, however, is it an art object for the viewers enjoyment or something more.

Discussion of Influential Artists:



Mel Chin:

I first became interested in Mel Chin after seeing an image of one of his installations, which consisted of a sea urchin split in half and mounted on the wall with a

¹⁸ Baas, Jacquelyn, and Mary Jane Jacob, ed. Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art. Berkely: University of California Press. 2004.

large curvilinear form hanging directly above it. This piece was a reference to a Greek story, a sort of retelling. I enjoy the simplicity of this installation. I began looking at more of his work and started to really connect with his method of transforming materials in an alchemistic way, something I would certainly emulate later. He also researched and charged his work with cryptic content and expected his viewers to enjoy the work in layers starting with the appreciation of the formal elements and then slowly uncovering the content with use of a “Key” that Chin provided. I was at this time beginning to think along similar lines. I became interested in allowing the viewer to enjoy the formal qualities of the work first, and then dive deeper to find the content within. “With scholarly meticulousness he loads his work with a multitude of cultural references that once recognized convey a sense of the worlds cultures interacting as a whole. The work itself then is a multicultural object combining elements from different ages and traditions..”¹⁹ The discovery of Chins work really changed my explorations into content and historical significances. It allowed me, in a way, to make work, which drew heavily on content in the making but did not rely on it for the works ultimate success.

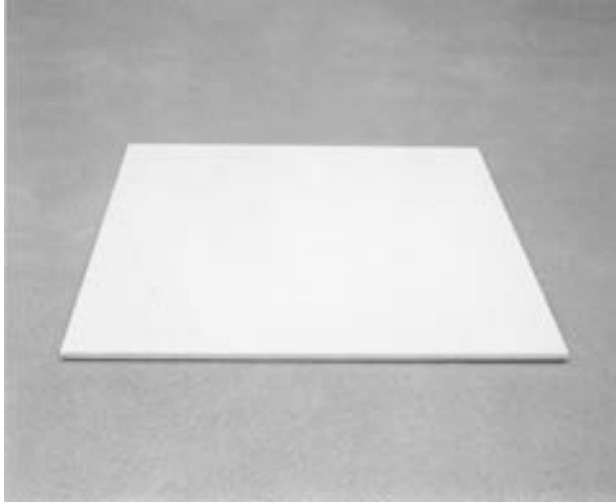
Chin’s art is meant to be experienced in steps, first aesthetically, then through personal interpretation. Ultimately Chin provides some kind of key that allows the viewer to unlock the meaning. The viewer’s consciousness is refocused in such a way that they see a certain aspect of reality. I found this formula to be exactly what I needed to make the work I had planned. My research resulted in ideas that could be expressed through the objects I have made and experienced by the viewer who could then enjoy the pieces on multiple levels depending on the amount of effort they choose to put forth.

Wolfgang Laib:

I have become interested in Wolfgang Laib’s sculpture indirectly. The objects he creates do not particularly impress me, but I find the methods and simplicity of the work inspiring. I am drawn towards the connections he has created between medicine and art, and the art making practice itself. . “Much of Laib’s work is inspired by rituals and

¹⁹ McEvelley, Thomas. Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

cultural practices from India. Laib's work is eidetic, a term from the Greek *eidos*, for Plato the essential or universal form or idea underlying all experience."²⁰



Laib's methodology is meditative and therapeutic, referencing his education as a medical doctor. He came to believe, however, that his ambitions for helping could be better implemented through the making of art. "Throughout history or prehistory, art was viewed as a power, which could heal. Artistically mediated healing was believed to result from the touching of icons. These icons, imbued with the deity or power of the deity, would heal ritualistically. Most modernists found the pre-modernist view of art as magical therapy naive and superstitious; but the neo-pre-modernist sees the modernist worship of pure forms for themselves, with no additional therapeutic end, as soulless, frivolous, and irresponsible."²¹ Throughout art history these ideas have been mixed and rarely separated. For example many modernists held the view that art should be good for you. An underlying spiritual aspect of formalist modernism can be seen in many artists work such as Piet Mondrian, and Kasimir Malevich. "Malevich believed his ascent to the pure non-objective art was equivalent to the mystics ascent to Mt. Carmel."²² Mondrian believed his paintings emitted vibrational patterns into the atmosphere and these could harmonize the viewer. Artists such as these truly believed their works were intimately

²⁰ Ottmann, Klaus. Wolfgang Laib A Retrospective. New York: American Federation of Arts. 2000.

²¹ McEvelley, Thomas. Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

²² McEvelley, Thomas. Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

connected to the inner structure of reality. “Laib talks about the seeming connection with minimalism, that it has a lot more to do with the ascetic than the aesthetic, the simplicity is not about reductivism but a renunciation.”²³ Laib’s work is made with the belief that the materials he uses have magico-religious power.



James Lee Byars:

I became very interested in the work of James Lee Byars’ for his economy of form as well as the conceptual elements he employed. He used very basic forms and material, decadent surface treatments, a simplistic aesthetic, and a dire connection with alchemy. Using materials such as marble, gold, and, red velvet, he created irreducible forms such as cubes and spheres. These elements were considered by Byars to be the building blocks of the universe. For Byars gold represented the negation of this world and held none of the content associated with wealth and prosperity. McEvilley writes Byars “artistic vocabulary was an attempt to arrive at the irreducible elements from which the universe might be constructed.”²⁴

The materials he used were minimal, canceling out the material as a physical element, and transferring it to the spiritual realm. “As an artist, Byars advocates a practically oriented, interrogative philosophy. According to him, man frees himself through asking questions.”²⁵ “What I basically try to do is to resolve questions with questions. This is the aim of my work as well. My work poses a wide range of questions; indeed it touches upon all the questions we human beings ask ourselves.”²⁶

²³ Ottmann, Klaus. Wolfgang Laib A Retropective. New York: American Federation of Arts. 2000.

²⁴ McEvilley, Thomas. Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

²⁵ Harten, Jurgen, ed. James Lee Byars : the Philosophical Palace = Palast der Philosophie. Dusseldorf: Stadtische Kunsthalle. 1986.

²⁶ *ibid*

Marina Abramovic:



I am interested in Marina Abramovic's later work, which seems to be mostly sculptural, object oriented. This work is very similar to the modernist tradition of therapeutic abstraction, specifically the work of Piet Mondrian and Yves Klein. "Yves believed that spiritual entities which

he projected into his work invisibly through meditation practices could awaken higher awareness in the viewers."²⁷ These artists believed that a work's power over the viewer came from the configuration of the piece and not the power of the materials themselves. In this way the modernist differed from the pre-modern tradition. The work Abramovic made that I found most compelling includes a series of crystal furniture. These pieces were intended to be interactive, and refer to direct connection with the Buddhist meditative practices Vipassana. In Vipassana the traditional meditative poses are, lying down, sitting, walking, and standing. The pieces suggest that the body and mind must be engaged in meditative concentration to activate and receive the influence. Abramovic has likewise searched for an intuitive connection with materials, and encouraged the viewer to do the same.²⁸ A good example of her belief in the power of the materials is the piece she created in an amethyst mine in Brazil. She lay down in front of a mound of crystals without moving "waiting for an idea". Her intention was for the crystals to grant her the idea she was waiting for.

She speaks about a vibratory link between the stone and humans.²⁹ Marina speaks about power objects, "I think, that energy can actually be captured in the objects

²⁷ McEvelley, Thomas. Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

²⁸ McEvelley, Thomas. Sculpture in the Age of Doubt. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

²⁹ Brandauser, Aline. "Marina Abramovic": objects performance video sound." Sculpture. July-August. 1995. 24+.

themselves. You can start with any object and create an energy field around it, again and again, through ritual. Gradually the object becomes a tool.”³⁰ I think these ideas became influential in the pieces I made such as *The Empty Middle*, and *Basin #1 and #2* as well as *Surface for Dreaming #1 and #2*, which are fundamentally about the inherent power contained within the material itself. This power may be naturally occurring or created by altering the material and imbuing it with power or value and meaning.



Katherina Fritsch:

I am also influenced by the work of Katherina Fritsch. Her work uses imagery that triggers a sense of the familiar, something like a shared or collective memory. Fritsch seems to be able to generate a simultaneous experience of oneness combined with otherness. It is this aspect of her work that has been most influential on my own. Her works also seem to have a similar connection to magic realism, a sense of not being able to grasp everything.

“They (the work) trigger the jolt of anthropomorphic recognition; yet the experience of Fritsch’s figures is one which hovers between familiarity and the mesmeric fascination of a profound otherness. They go further; their sharp presence intimates a symbolic zone resonant of dark things; the unconscious, mortality, the ghost.”³¹

³⁰ McEvelley, Thomas. *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

³¹ Allington, Edward. *Katharina Fritsch*. Iwona Blazwick, ed. London: Tate. 2002.



David Lynch:

I am greatly influenced by the work of David Lynch. He seems to work intuitively, but I interpret his work as very conceptual and richly layered with meaning. The one constant I found was his idea of understanding, which he believes is accomplished through letting go of control and preconceptions.³² His approach is along the lines of Buddhist belief. He believes we are in a labyrinth of language in which the exit is available to us unless we attempt to control it. He mentions the “will to lose ones will” as well as the “mystery of resemblance and difference”.³³

Narrative for Lynch is not initially processed in a rational way. Lynch talks about a balance between reason and direct subconscious engagement and the materiality/physicality of the object film. It is not at all about abandoning reason. The experience is not dependant on pure form or on irrationalism. Rather it is dependant on a tension that denotes a powerful connectedness. For Lynch connectedness is what emerges from the tension between reason and the subconscious.

Understanding the connections requires a balance between force and receptivity. Dreaming brings us to truth, and the dreaming Lynch refers to requires a conscious letting go. The desire to lose one’s will. An overdependence on a rationalist illusion of

³² Nochimson, Martha P. The Passion of David Lynch : Wild at Heart in Hollywood. Austin: University of Texas. 1997.

³³ Nochimson, Martha P. The Passion of David Lynch : Wild at Heart in Hollywood. Austin: University of Texas. 1997.

control is ultimately an obstacle to poetic truths. The Lynchian paradox is ordinary reality continually breaking down yet, always in place.

Eric Orr:

After discovering Eric Orr's work the ideas I had been bouncing around seem to fall into place. Orr's work is concerned with the primal concept of space worship. Newton called space "the sensorium of god"³⁴ which meant in platonic terms the screen onto which the world dream is projected. This idea would pop up either directly or indirectly in most of the work in my thesis.

At some point, Orr decided to focus on the combination of aesthetic elegance and an analogue that falls between science and the ancient traditions of magical art, at once strange and some how recognizable. This idea is pivotal to me, and my focus in the making of this sculpture. "Orr's sculpture was more concerned with the disappearance of the object than with the object itself."³⁵ He was interested in small perceptual shifts, suggesting a space beyond boundaries an analogue to the primal abyss of Egyptian mythology, the primal space, beginning space as well as ending space.



Ingmar Bergman:

I have also become very interested in the films of Ingmar Bergman. His movies seem to be about the constant search for god and a sort of desperation in this search. There is an illusion of God's existence and religion is presented as a saving grace. This grace is never reached or, if it is, is false and delivers no piece of mind. Berman's films present a bleak standpoint where religion provides a false security and ultimately fails the devotee, leaving them on their own. I am interested in the examination of religion in the same way. In my pieces *Give Me My Children Back*, and *Jacobs Pillow*, as well as *I Waited* I am critically examining the validity of faith, as well as the methods of the perpetuation of faith.

³⁴ McEvelley, Thomas. *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

³⁵ McEvelley, Thomas. *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*. New York: School of Visual Arts. 1999.

Evolution of Thesis Work:

My previous body of work dealt almost exclusively with communication between individuals. I explored the idea of physical and implied exchange between two people through the creation of helmets. Through the devices I created, the two individuals were involved in an exchange but the quality of the exchange was greatly determined by the device, which limited certain sensory information to the users so that the space where sound traveled became an area of extra sensory exchange. The people using the devices became part of the work. This void between two individuals and the sense of space it contained became for me, the most important aspect of the exchange. This space became charged in a metaphysical way. The two people transcended their individuality and physicality and merged to become something more. I became fascinated with this and started looking to history to find references for similar occurrences. I found a strong connection in the temple and religious experience. Concepts of transcendence, and alchemy seemed to tie right into what I was thinking. I began to consider the similarities between my attraction to this exchange and a previous infatuation with stone foundations and relics. I started my research into stone-age remnants and art. Stone circles, menhirs, standing stones, and wells all became connected. These objects were allegories, representations of spiritual ideas through concrete or material forms. This research introduced me to the anthropologist Mircea Eliade. The books by Eliade brought to light the idea of circular time and re-creation acts, regeneration and the ability of the individual to be connected to all of history to the very beginning by carrying out a mythical act. Anyone could control history by creating a circle, or standing a stone in a meaningful way. The creation myths Eliade spoke of enticed me to examine the idea of a myth again; the myth could be brought into the contemporary time frame simply by carrying out an act. This freed me to explore objects in a new way. But it also created a rift in my conceptual framework. I became aware of a belief that I was part of something greater than myself. Simultaneously, I felt completely confident that I was conscious of the charlatan aspect of my work and thought that this was certainly the idea. My intention was to make the object and although it is not something from antiquity, it may look like

something that has a purpose or a history greater than itself. In the end, however, it is an object that I fabricated. The meaning and value is only existent because I placed it there and gave it a story. I also recognized that this sounded very similar to the form and function of Neolithic relics and objects. As mentioned before, *objects and acts acquire a value and become real, by participating in a reality that transcends them.* “Among countless stones, one stone becomes sacred – and hence instantly becomes saturated with being- because it constitutes a hierophany, or possesses mana, or again because it commemorates a mythical act, and so on. The object appears as a receptacle of an exterior force that differentiates it from its milieu and gives it meaning and value. This force may reside in the substance of the object or in its form.”³⁶ And the circle continues.

The Body of Work



The piece “Jacobs Pillow” is made from Vermont marble and applied gold leaf. “Jacobs Pillow” is based on the story of Jacob, an early Christian who falls asleep on a stone in the forest. During his sleep he has a vision of god and believes the stone to be significant in this vision. Upon awaking, he removes the stone from the forest and brings it to a church where he sanctifies it, places it on a pedestal and anoints it with oil. These

³⁶ Eliade, Mircea. The Myth of the Eternal Return. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Pantheon Books. 1954.

actions indicate that Jacob believed the stone itself to be holy as it allowed him to contact God.

The history of stones having powers, or being “chosen” to be receptacles for something holy or sacred is rich. I am fascinated by this ritual and practice. I am also interested in objects I have found that seem to radiate value or singular meaning of some sort. This piece was made to illustrate the practice humans have of projecting meaning and value into inanimate objects, as well as their belief that these objects can help them to attain a connection with something beyond themselves.



“The Golden Bough” was made from an actual piece of wood, cut at random, and sanded. I made a mold of it and cast multiples in iron, applying gold leaf to 29 of them. One was left the grey color of the cast iron with little or no surface treatment. I installed the piece in a linear fashion on the wall, with the last one in the line the plain grey one.

“The Golden Bough” has its roots in Sir James Frazer’s’ Book about mythology and religion. The book describes a similar phenomenon that is shared by many early cultures, in which mistletoe, a parasitic plant that grows primarily on the oak tree, is worshipped and revered. He illustrates the rich intertwining history of the mistletoe as seen in the Druidic cultures of Eastern Europe as well as the cultures of Norse people, the

Tartars, and the Greeks.³⁷ Essentially the mistletoe is believed to be a powerful plant, which when administered to humans or livestock has the ability to make one fertile. There are numerous legends and myths about this plant. The Norse mischief-maker Loki, used mistletoe as a weapon to kill the impervious Balder.³⁸ Both the Druids and the Italians believed that if a woman carried a piece of mistletoe, it would help her conceive.³⁹ The Aino of Japan also revered mistletoe, as a cure for many diseases and, when worn inside armor, as protection against injury.

“The reverence with which the mistletoe was held is identical to that of the silver branch or bough of ancient Celtic tradition. This branch, the property of the Irish god Manannan, a deity intimately associated with Druidic art, was cut from an apple tree. It furnished the bearer with food and drink and from it emanated enchanting music. It led one to the abode of the gods and was a symbol of the divine tree standing on the center of paradise.”⁴⁰

The mistletoe was also believed to contain the essence of the tree, sent from heaven, and must only be cut with gold. The plant did not grow from the ground and was therefore, suspended between heaven and earth. Holding the spirit in a suspended state, protected and not present in either, it connected both. The plant was the key, allowing a connection between earth and the sky. In the epic Aeneid by Virgil, Aeneas and the Sibyl present the Golden Bough to the gatekeeper of Hades in order to gain admission.⁴¹ The bough served as a key, allowing movement from one plane to another. In my sculpture I am referencing this history, especially the idea of the Golden Bough as an intermediary between the physical and the spiritual.

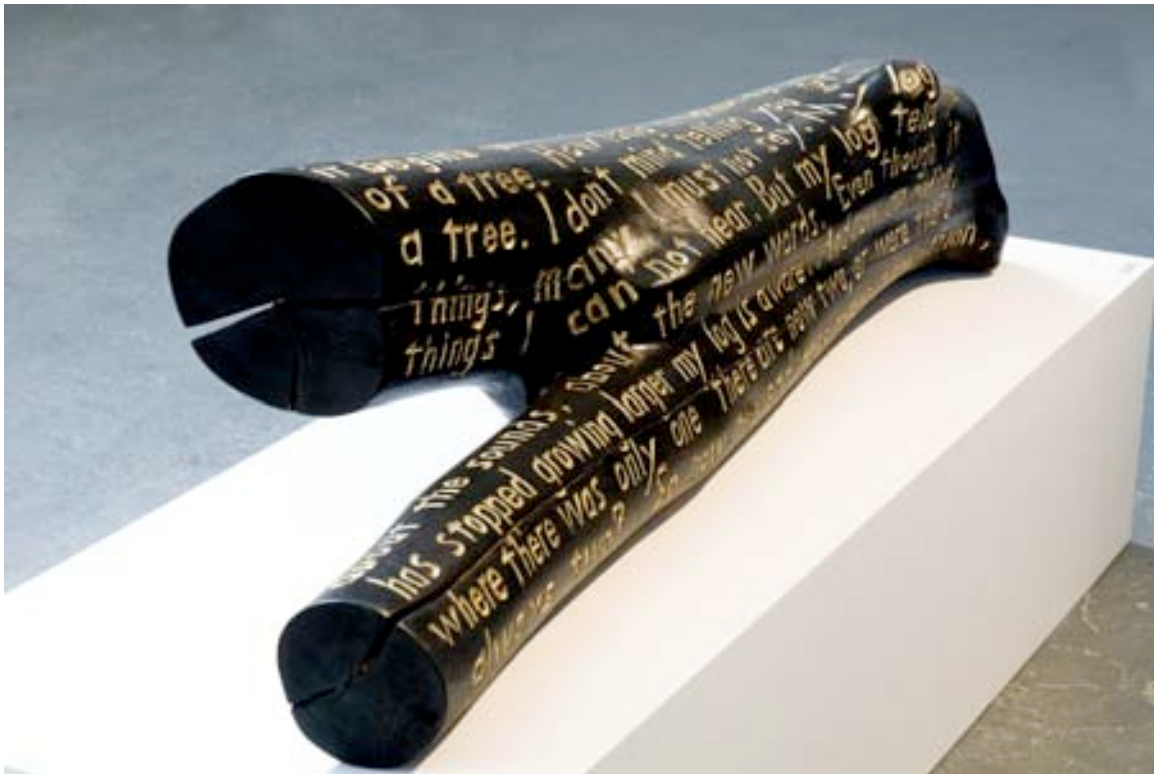
³⁷ Frazer, Sir James. The Golden Bough; a Study in Magic and Religion. New York: Macmillan. 1963.

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ Piggott, Stuart. The Druids. New York: Frederick A. Praeger. 1968.

⁴⁰ Spence, Lewis. Druids : Their Origins and History. New York: Barnes and Noble. 1995.

⁴¹ Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia. Aeneid. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/aeneid>. 11/06/2007



"The Log Lady" is made from the 'Y' in a tree; I carved letters into it and applied gold leaf into the recessed letters. The surface of the log was burnt and sealed to give it a sensuous contrast to the bright gold leaf.

The content of "The Log Lady" is taken from a monologue written by David Lynch for the television show Twin Peaks. The Show was very cryptic with underlying currents of supernatural powers at work culminating with the main character entering another dimension in search of resolution. Lynch suggests that we have to understand we have created the cultural forms we give meaning to and they only contain the meaning we give them. Therein, we are free to understand the forces that are larger than individuals and how these forces connect us to a greater reality.⁴² Lynch describes his main characters as being able to get us out of the "labyrinth"⁴³ if we only let it happen. The truths are always there unless we insist on the fantasy of control and, therefore, doom ourselves to a sense of disconnectedness. He speaks of a will to lose ones will, a balance

⁴² Nochimson, Martha P. The Passion of David Lynch : Wild at Heart in Hollywood. Austin: University of Texas. 1997.

⁴³ *ibid*

between force and receptivity. The Lychian Log Lady, in particular, draws the viewer away from words and towards primal senses. Encouraging a yearning for neither understanding nor a final solution, we are to let go. She counsels us to seek new connections to an alternate understanding of the real. As she holds the log in her arms, she interprets what the log tells her and informs those who need to know the information through a connection with the beyond. This connection between the physical object of her log and the spiritual or the beyond is my focus in the piece.



In the pieces “*Mercury*”, numbers one and two, I am directly referring to the Greek god Mercury also known as Hermes. Hermes is the messenger between Heaven and Earth. It was believed that he was born on the forth day of the month.⁴⁴ Hermes means pile of marker stones; and as the god of boundaries and travelers who cross them, he was the inspiration for the practice of erecting posts and markers. Hermes also gives us the word Hermeneutics for the art of interpreting hidden meaning. The related word Herma means

⁴⁴ Crystallinks.com. Hermes – Crystalinks. <http://crystalinks.com/hermes2.html>. 06/14/2007.

boundary stone or crossing point.⁴⁵ This suggests this idea of crossing over, interchange, transcendence, and transit, all aspects of moving from one to the other.



“Surface For Dreaming”, numbers one and two, are based on the concept that an object can function as a connection between the physical and the spiritual, earth and heaven, the material and the immaterial. The act of splitting the stone has revealed the inner value and content of the object in number one, while in number two, the stone is split but remains intact. In both pieces I am drawing on the visual language established by primitive humans from various cultures who worked with such practices to create

⁴⁵ Crystallinks.com. Hermes – Crystalinks. <http://crystalinks.com/hermes2.html>. 06/14/2007.

monuments such as the standing stones or menhirs from Eastern Europe and the stacked stones and pillars of ancient Romans and Greeks.



The title "Surface For Dreaming" refers to an internal value, in this case represented with copper as the receptive membrane, as well as the act of releasing control or 'letting go'. As David Lynch explains, we are free to understand the forces that are

larger than us and how they connect us to a greater reality.⁴⁶ These objects have the ability to let you dream if you allow it to happen without forcing your will onto them.



The sculptures "Basin", numbers three and two, are derived from the idea of a vessel and water used symbolically to initiate a transcendence, through immersion, such as baptism. There are also many examples of basins, found in ruins throughout Europe and South America, thought to have been used in rituals such as sacrifices and healing baths.

⁴⁶ Nochimson, Martha P. The Passion of David Lynch : Wild at Heart in Hollywood. Austin: University of Texas. 1997.



This work also references the tea ceremony bowls used to cleanse during the ceremony. These Basins resemble the mortar part of a mortar and pestle, a tool used to transform solid objects into powders. The object connects a physical function with an abstract spiritual concept.



Th

e pieces “*The Empty Mid-Point*” and “*Menhirs*” are centered on the space created between three standing forms. The number three is significant in that it is the first number that can be considered a group, and the smallest number of objects that can be arranged in

a circular fashion. “Three is a triple word, for the hierarchical order always manifests itself by three. The word simple, the word hieroglyphic, the word symbolic; or the word that expresses, the word that conceals, the word that signifies. All hieratic intelligence is the perfect knowledge of these degrees.” Pythagoras.” The force and power of three has been identified with the Trinity by the wise men throughout the ages.⁴⁷ All great world religions worship a three-fold godhead. In other Christian religions for example the trinity is the father, the son and the Holy Spirit. In the Masonic fraternity the progression is represented by the three degrees consisting of the apprentice, the fellow craft, and the master.⁴⁸ These degrees represent a connection to earlier ‘ancient wisdom’ practiced by the Hierophants. In the life of the supreme Teacher the three degrees are the Baptism, the Transfiguration, and the Resurrection. Pythagoras gave utterance to a deep mystic truth when he said: “All Hieratic intelligence is in the perfect knowledge of these three degrees. The number three is represented by the Golden Flame or illuminated Gold. It represents the dross of the lower nature lifted up and transmuted into radiance of a new life, its aura being as white as snow, and as golden as the sun.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Roob, Alexander. The Hermetic Museum : Alchemy and Mysticism. New York: Taschen. 1997.

⁴⁸ Roob, Alexander. The Hermetic Museum : Alchemy and Mysticism. New York: Taschen. 1997.

⁴⁹ Helene, Corinne. Sacred Science of Numbers. California: New Age Press. 1971.



These pieces are reinterpretations of stone configurations found throughout Eastern Europe, such as the well-known Stonehenge. They are believed to be markers of sacred space based upon the concept of cosmogony. Cosmogony is the beginning or creation of

all worldly existence. “It occurs in many cultures allowing anyone to become a part of history by repeating the cosmogony, or symbolically re-creating the world by constructing a microcosm of the universe, a circle. The repetition of the primordial act turns chaos into cosmos. By participating in this practice humans can become part of mythic time, or holy time. Concrete time in which the construct takes place is projected into mythical time, *in illo tempore*, when the foundation of the world occurred.”⁵⁰ Thus reality and the enduringness of a construction are assured by the transformation of profane space into a transcendent space (the center). Wherever this formation occurs is in effect the center of the symbolic world as well as a point that connects earth to the heavens. This center is the point at which all begins, the highest concentration, a representation of the non-representable, the seat of the divine. The empty midpoint and holy space is reserved and inaccessible. This primal space is where questions are derived and from which they proceed.

⁵⁰ Eliade, Mircea. Myth and Reality. Translated from French by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harper and Row. 1963.



“Transference” Is primarily based on the Celtic curb stone patterning, spirals and curving lines. The curb stones marked the entrances to tombs and holy spaces. They were boundary markers and the pattern connected the physical world with the spiritual.



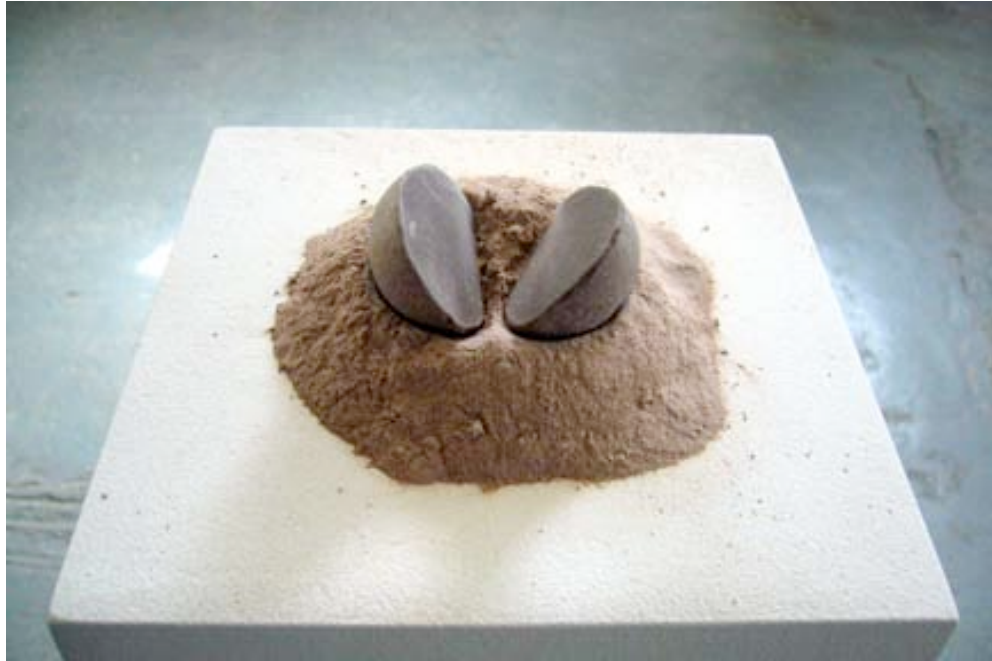
“Deus

otiosus”, numbers one and two, refer to marker stones and stories about gods or people who wronged the gods and were punished by being turned to stone. Deus otious is a theological concept that means idle god and describes the belief in a creator who retires from the world, a hidden god whose existence is not readily knowable by humans through contemplation. Some tribes acknowledge the existence of a supreme being but one who plays no part in religious life. In addition, little is even known about him. This

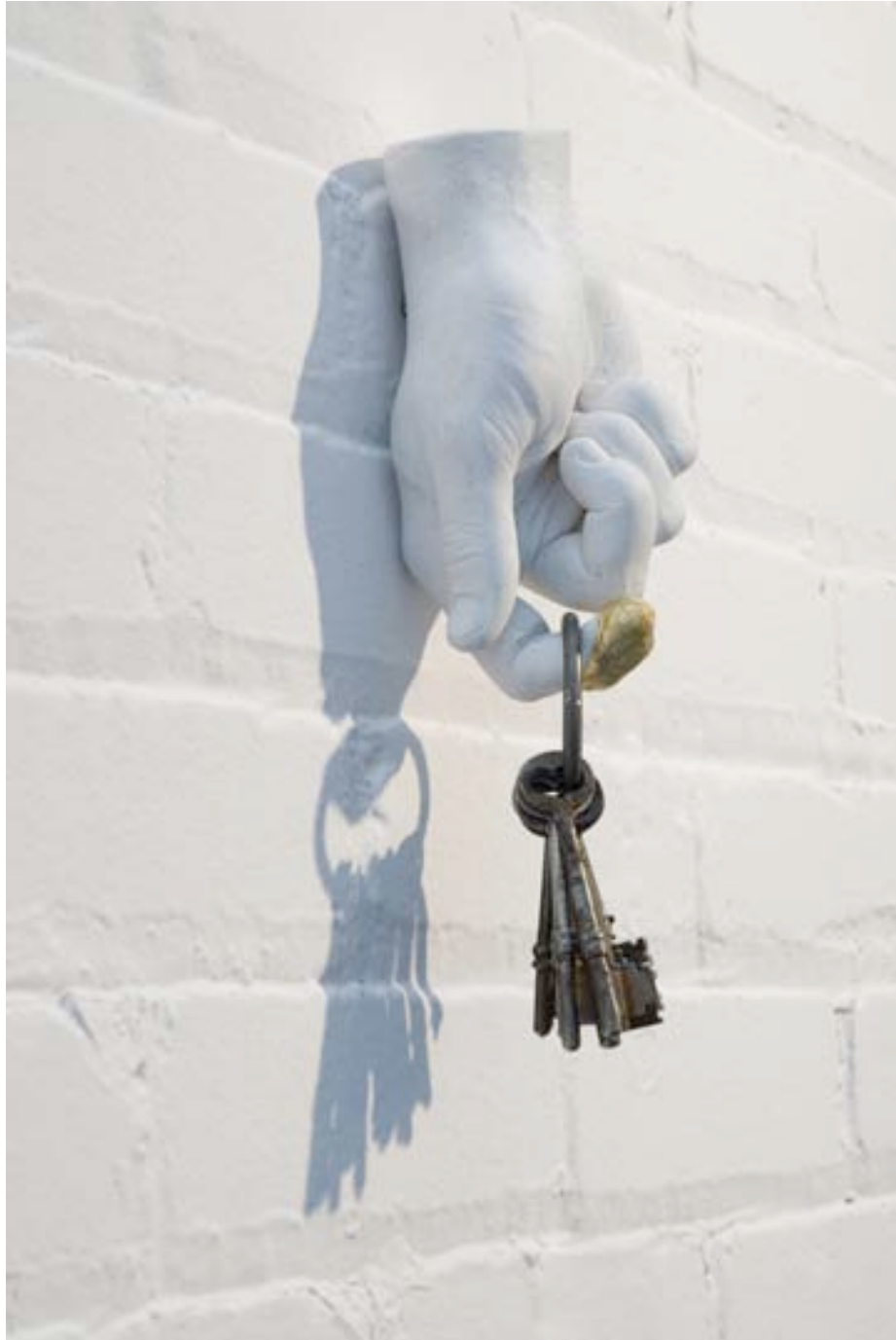
Supreme Being is believed to have created the world and man but soon abandoned him and withdrew to the sky.



These forms are fashioned, much like “Mercury”, after axe heads used in the Neolithic and early bronze ages as symbols of power. These symbols gave the owners control over others by allowing them to communicate with the gods. The objects were revered, and those who controlled them had the authority to mediate the lives of others. So, they are both representations of receptacles and portals in the same fashion as the “basins”.



The piece "*I waited*", is a direct interpretation of a story about an early Christian who is told by god to rub two stones together until he returns. There is also a story about Eskimo shamanic candidates, who rub stones together while waiting for the Great Spirit to devour their flesh thus initiate them. The stones are a reassurance that the divine would indeed appear in a set amount of time. Rubbing stones together can be seen as a sort of meditation where the individual relinquishes control and allows time to pass focusing on the act of rubbing. This faith in god's return is expected in many religions and is rarely given a time frame.



“Give Me My Children Back” is a piece based on a German Fairy tale. In this story a women gives up her daughter to the Virgin Mary who takes her to heaven. While the child is there she is given the keys to heaven’s thirteen doors, and told she can open all but the thirteenth. The child disobeys and opens the thirteenth witnessing the holy trinity behind the door. She becomes entranced by the splendor and touches it with her finger. The finger becomes covered in gold. She quickly leaves and upon seeing Mary

denies having entered the thirteenth door. Mary knows she is lying and banishes her from heaven. Throughout her life Mary gives the woman opportunities to admit she had lied and ask forgiveness. The woman denies her sin and each time Mary takes another of her newborn children away from her. Until, finally, she accepts gods grace, tells the truth and asks for forgiveness. Her children are returned and she lives happily ever after. The fairy tale tells of the journey from no to yes, from the pride of self to the letting go and acceptance of faith and belief in ultimate salvation.

CONCLUSION:

I believe my thesis work was an overall success. The work covered a wide range of ideas, but held a similar theme. I think some aspects worked better than others, when considered from the viewer's perspective. One aspect that was questionable was the mixture of themes and materials from clearly defined time periods. Most of the research and influence I had was pre-modern; something the stone monoliths and iron pieces seemed to speak to directly. I was, however, very interested in tying the present culture and incorporating references to contemporary myths into the show. This aspect was confusing, especially when the viewer was not privy to the back-story and content of the work. The only clues were titles and the forms themselves. However, this information is secondary and is available if the viewer digs deeper into the work to uncover the information and references I have woven into the sculpture.

The research was as important to me as the creation of the work. In many ways it was more important. The process I used in making this body of sculpture was quite different from previous work. I researched and then made, as opposed to made and then found the historical and conceptual connections. This direction informed the work in a deeper way than I am used to. I found it may have confused me more as well as introduced too many possibilities to the ultimate goal of the work. As was stated in the *Additional Statements:* section, I did become torn between believing that the work could be a part of history, have historical significance, and not. I ultimately resolved the issue to a point of putting it to sleep and, in doing so, discovered my reasons for being involved in the work. I think that at the times I believed the work was greater, it was, and when I

thought it was a hoax, it was that as well. The pieces I really feel were successful conceptually were “*I waited*”, “*Jacobs Pillow*”, and “*Give Me My Children Back*”. They each contained the elegance and simplicity I have enjoyed with other artists’ work like James lee Byars, and Mel Chin. Formally, I feel “*Basin*”, numbers Three and Two, and “*Menhirs*” were successful. I believe this experience has given me a foundation for my future work. I enjoy researching and connecting the work I am making with what I discover. I will attempt to incorporate an elegant simplicity with a generally accessible content. I think that would be nice.